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# Of Aryan Origin(s), Western Canon(s), and Iranian Modernity

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From 1901 to his death in 1941, Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski insisted that the source of Western architecture is to be found in greater Iran. While his theories changed over the decades, along with the alleged origin of "Oriental Aryans," they had a significant impact on the secularist elite of Iran, who in the 1910s and 1920s appropriated Strzygowski's ideas in claiming artistic as well as political superiority vis-à-vis the West.

Based on his archaeological digs, the German Orientalist Ernest Herzfeld had hypothesized that the term "Iranian" was historically linked to Aryan tribes that had migrated into the region.[1] Soon after, in November 1934, the king of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi (ruled 1926–1941), decreed the permanent substitution of the country's official name of "Persia" by "Iran," signifying the Land of Aryans. While political historians ascribe this highly symbolic shift to the king's chauvinistic nationalism, they overlook the fact that, four decades earlier, the matter had been raised by European art historians. The so-called *Orient or Rome* debate was inflamed by the simultaneous publication of two books in 1901. On the one hand, Italian archaeologist Giovanni Rivoira in his *Lombardic Architecture* argued that the origin of all Western architecture is to be found in Roman ingenuity. In his *Orient oder Rom*, on the other hand, Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski contended that "The true source of Western artistic genius is located in the Indogermanic *Geist*," pointing instead to Iran. Decades later, Strzygowski continued to implore enthusiasts and skeptics alike to trace Western artistic connections "not to the ancient Near East . . . not to Persia but to Iran."[2]

Strzygowski's proposed shift in architectural origin—both temporal and spatial from ancient Iran to modern Europe—not only created a theoretical crisis in the academic discourses in the West and was later described as "one of the most heated controversies of modern scholarship,"[3] but also provided the early twentieth-century Iranian intelligentsia with a methodological model to cross temporal boundaries in search of their authentic national origins in Iran's pre-Islamic, specifically Achaemenid (ruled

559–331 BC), antiquities. It provided them with an artistic strategy of rise and decline, where in writing Iran's architectural as well as sociopolitical history, selected artifacts were perceived and defined as high points of Iranian civilization as a linear national progress. While European art historians debated over the ostensibly pure origin of European architecture, Iran's ideologies and architects alike not only appropriated one side of this argument in asserting that antique Iran, indeed, housed the prototype of all subsequent European forms that had migrated from Aryan Iran, but also embarked on an complex project of remaking its high culture by constantly going back to an authentic artistic origin. In effect, in European quarrels Iranians found the basis to strengthen their claim to political equality, national sovereignty, and crucially, racial and cultural superiority in that which they perceived as the civilized world. They eventually also managed to present their nation through a new kind of hybrid architecture. By the late 1910s, therefore, Iran's architecture consisted of a rich stylistic amalgam of European imports, Achaemenid revival, and Islamic traditions. By so doing, the reformists not only disrupted the strict boundaries of Western and local constructs of stylistic conventions, racial discourses, and historical identities, but also offered a sort of anti-colonial universalism that was incarnated in an explicitly hybrid visual language. It, in turn, came to define their perception of a modern Iran as well as its place in the new century. Hence, two hypotheses initiated in "Rom" had set the theoretical conditions for architectural productions in the "Orient."

Centered on Strzygowski's architectural theories, this paper traces the link between the now lost ties between Europe's struggles to define a universalistic architectural canon and the outcome of such undertakings on Iran's stylistic eclecticism of the 1910s and 1920s. Through the *Orient or Rome* debate, this paper addresses the following questions: what happened to modern architectural styles and inquiries when—through a shifted site of origin—the main historical and aesthetic frames of reference changed? What were the profound implications of such boundary-crossing for an infant architectural profession in a modernization society, local perceptions and constructs of self-other, as well as European dealings with their colonial counterparts? In the larger sociopolitical context, how were questions of national identities and historiography dealt with when both European and Iranian art-historians were urged to look to the Orient for architectural prototypes? Finally, why were these passionate discourses silenced and forgotten in much of the post-World War II architectural investigations?

Methodologically, Strzygowski's object-oriented analysis that promoted a new approach to artifacts by determining their parent form enabled him to narrow his architectural type to the dome on a square base, early examples of which he had documented in Armenia (fig. 1). Contending that the morphological evolution of these two basic elements—the dome and the square—was pivotal to the migration and transformation of architectural traditions in different Indo-European societies, he insisted that the domed, radiating-plan had evolved from the hearth with a genesis in the Indo-Germanic and Zoroastrian religious rituals of circumambulating the fire. The medieval Armenian church-plan thus led Strzygowski to the simpler brick structures of Zoroastrian fire temples in Parthian Iran with the basic configuration of the local *chahar taq*. More importantly, for Strzygowski, these typological migrations had not occurred randomly; they had occurred because of the shared Indo-European rituals and beliefs of Aryans from India to Scandinavia. Hence each stood not only as expressions of each nation's nature but also as the ancestral tie between all Aryans.

Back in Iran, the late nineteenth-century intellectuals and politicians found a conceptual use in Strzygowski's art-historical methods. While small and heterogeneous, they shared a vision of the future of Iran that was secular, constitutional, national and free from domestic and western imperial domination. The prominent members, among others, included prime ministers and scholars, Mohammad Ali Forughi, Hassan Mostofi, and Hasan Pirnia; court ministers, Abd-al-Hosayn Teymurtash and Hosayn Ala; governors and cabinet ministers, Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, Firuz Mirza Firuz, Ebrahim Hakimi, and Isa Sadiq.[4] By the end of the Great War, German archeologist Ernest Herzfeld, French architect André Godard, and American art-historians Phyllis Ackerman and Arthur Upham Pope had joined these men. In defense of constitutionalism and territorial integrity, they advocate a return to Iran's pre-Islamic ethos, purification of race, culture, and language, and, hence, drew public awareness to ancient ruins, especially Persepolis. Based on the Iranian reading of Strzygowski's "Aryan architecture," therefore, these reformists began to project the artistic production of Iran not as "Islamic Art," but rather as a long "Aryan" canon that had been "contaminated" by what Strzygowski had called the "Semitic wedge" dividing the "eastern and western branches of the Aryans."[5] The 1901 art-historical debate, predominantly concerned with the origin of European architecture, not only had a bearing on the subsequent normative construct of "Mohammedan Art" in the West, but also on how modernists and secularists in Iran perceived and presented themselves well into the 1980s, as a distinct Aryan nation through a new architectural vocabulary.

The most politically explicit example of the hybrid style was the soon-to-be Reza Shah's first architectural commission, with the recommendation of his reformist ministers: the Green Palace (fig. 2). Directly facing the palace of the last Qajar king, Ahmad Shah (ruled 1909–1925), the erection of this new palace was not only designed to challenge to the *ancien regime*'s fading political legitimacy, but also signaled a difference in royal taste. While it intentionally utilized Western-inspired construction materials, decorative motives, and morphology, Reza Khan had placed Iranian architects in change. In sharp contrast to the brick façade of the Qajar palace, the green marble slabs of the Green Palace were outdone by the selection of Renaissance reliefs, for example, the well-executed copies of Luca della Robbia's 1438 *Cantoria* for the cathedral of Florence. The main portal was decorated with Persian calligraphy of the name of the new royal dynasty (fig. 3). The interior decorations relied on the Achaemenid motive of the king slaying a lion, copies of the original from the Hall of One Hundred Columns in Persepolis. Another such reproduction from ancient sources was a standing guard. Each of these Italian Renaissance and Achaemenid icons were in turn incorporated into a rich amalgam of Islamic architectural elements: decorative stucco squinches, tile-work, wood-inlay-work, and mirror-work (fig. 4).

As part of Reza Shah's massive project of urban renewal in the 1930s, Qajar structures in general and the hybrid buildings in specific were targeted for demolition along with 30 percent of Teheran. Those that survived were noted as examples of bad taste, precisely because of their explicit eclecticism. Subsequent architects and architectural historians in their teachings and designs would reiterate these same ideas with a skewed and narrow understanding of either Iranian nationalistic ambitions or Western imperialistic intentions. In postwar Iran, for instance, newspaper article such as "The Iranian origins of Gothic architecture," "Iran's contribution to Europe's awakening," and "Iran and Italy: the cradles of civilization," while recycled earlier treatises had in reality lost the nuanced complexities of identity politics as well as its relation to a self-

aware visual coding.[6] In fact, the destruction of these buildings and their missing historiography paralleled Strzygowski's exile from Western art-historical discussions; as if a silencing of hybridity on both sides.

While ridiculed during his lifetime by leading art-historians such as Alois Riegl, Franz Wickhoff, Max Dvorak, and Rivoira, Strzygowski remains the first who "insisted upon the primary importance of oriental, Slavic, Germanic, and prehistorical material evidence in order to understand European history."[7] Lecturing in 1947, six years after Strzygowski's death, the director of the British School in Rome, John Ward-Perkins, insisted that while his colleagues should remember that it was Strzygowski who "first enlarged our horizons" and that it was Rivoira who "first championed the Roman element in Late Classical and Byzantine architecture," they should "forget once and for all the terms in which these theories were offered."[8] I believe we should do neither, precisely because the very conditions that lend themselves to the *Orient or Rome* debate persist while its history remains a cause of historiographic predicament. For albeit his brand of racism, Strzygowski had crossed the intellectual boundaries by pressing Western academia to transgress Rome in order to search for Western origins somewhere beyond a narrowly delineated definition of Europe. Despite theoretical manipulations, moreover, he provided Iranian reformists the historiographic tool to make temporal leaps from modern Iran to ancient Persia, on to Medieval Armenia, India, and Europe.

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- Fig. 4: Back view of Green Palace (photograph: Talinn Grigor, 2003).

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## NOTES DE FIN

**1.** See Mostafa VAZIRI, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity*, New York, 1993, pp. 75–78.
**2.** Annabel J. WHARTON, *Refiguring the Post Classical City*, New York, 1995, p. 5, pp. 3–14.
**3.** John B. Ward-Perkins, “The Italian Element in Late Roman and Early Medieval Architecture,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 33, London, 1947, pp. 163–94, p. 163.
**4.** For more details on the careers and activities of these men, see Talinn GRIGOR, *Cultivat(ing) Modernities: the Society for National Heritage, Political Propaganda, and Public Architecture in Twentieth-century Iran* (PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005), chapters 1–2; and Talinn GRIGOR, “reCultivating ‘Good Taste’: the early Pahlavi Modernists and their Society for National Heritage,” *Journal of Iranian Studies* 37/1 (March 2004), pp. 17–45.
**5.** Stephan KITE, “‘South opposed to East and North’: Adrian Stokes and Josef Strzygowski, a study in the aesthetics and historiography of Orientalism,” *Art History* 26/4 (September 2003), pp. 505–532, p. 507.
**6.** “Les origines iraniennes de l’architecture gothique,” *Le Journal de Téhéran* 11 (April 8, 1935), p. 1; “Une mise au point historique : contribution de l’Iran au reveil de l’Europe et à la culture mondiale,” *Le Journal de Téhéran* 807 (March 20, 1938), p. 1; and “L’Iran et l’Italie : les plus grands berceaux de la civilization,” *Le Journal de Téhéran* 6636 11 September 1957, p. 1.
**7.** Suzanne L. MARCHAND, “The rhetoric of artifacts and the decline of classical humanism: the case of Josef Strzygowski,” *History and Theory*, vol. 33, no. 4, Theme Issue 33: *Proof and Persuasion in History*, (December 1994), pp. 106–130, p. 123

**8.** John Bryan Ward-Perkins (1912–1981)'s lecture took place on November 26, 1947; see J. B. WARD-PERKINS "The Italian element in late Roman and early medieval architecture," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 33, London, 1947, pp. 163–194, p. 166.

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**Index chronologique :** époque contemporaine, XX$^{e}$ siècle

**Mots-clés :** archéologie, historiographie, identités politiques, Orient, Rome, universalisme

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